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SUBJECT: SAO TOME AND PRINCIPE LEGISLATIVE ELECTION PRIMER

Classified By: POLITICAL OFFICER GLENN FEDZER  
FOR REASON 1.4 (B)

¶1. (C) Summary: Sao Tome will hold legislative elections March 26. Ten political parties and coalitions will compete for all 55 seats in the National Assembly. Compared to other central African countries where the President dominates governance, the Assembly is the key institution in Sao Tome, with real control over law and budget. Today no one party holds sufficient seats to appoint a government, and despite significant campaign spending and accusations of vote buying, the outcome is likely to be continued governance by coalition. Most observers believe the election will be free and fair (although campaign tactics may not), and the results peacefully accepted by the population. End Summary.

A legislative election in Africa that matters

¶2. (U) The campaign for control of Sao Tome's Assembly kicked off March 11, with voting scheduled for March 26. Ten parties are competing for 55 seats in six districts on Sao Tome island and one encompassing Principe. Preliminary results should be available the night of voting, with official results published two weeks later.

¶3. (SBU) Compared to other central African legislatures, the democratically-elected National Assembly in Sao Tome plays an unusually strong role in the country's political life. Unlike in neighboring countries with a strong Presidency, the Assembly (and the government appointed by its majority) plays the dominant role in adopting legislation and budgets. Since currently no party holds a majority, (see para 5 below), forging consensus in the Assembly is difficult, sometimes interferes with legislation and has destabilized governments. The resulting stalemate is an ongoing source of frustration for the general population, as are the sparks that fly almost daily from friction between the assembly and the Presidency. Sao Tome has had three prime ministers in the last two years, all drawn from the MLSTP (which has formed alliances with other parties in the Assembly).

¶4. (SBU) Sao Tomeans are reluctant to predict which party will come out on top March 26, and many expect that heavy spending by the MLSTP, MDFM, and ADI will cancel each other out and produce an outcome not much different from the status quo. Despite high stakes and heavy spending, nearly everyone in Sao Tomean believes the population will peacefully accept the outcome, although some agitators may spark small non-violent demonstrations.

## A Cast of Characters

15. (C) Sao Tome has a mixed Presidential/Parliamentary system. The President currently appoints the Foreign and Defense Ministers, but he will lose this authority after the Presidential election in July. Ministers need not be sitting members of the Assembly, but the government formed must have the approval of an Assembly majority. The ten parties or coalitions running on March 26 are:

--MDFM/PCD coalition. The MDFM is the party of President Fradique Menezes and holds 23 seats in the current assembly. Observers and opponents allege the MDFM receives financial support from Nigeria, Libya, Equatorial Guinea, and Taiwan. The MDFM president is Tome Vera Cruz, and PCD and coalition President is Leonel Mario d'Alva. Former party stalwart and National Assembly Vice President Carlos Neves has split with Menezes and is leaving the MDFM to run with the UDD (see below).

--MLSTP/PSD Party (Note: PSD, "Social Democratic Party," was added to the "Movement for the Liberation of Sao Tome and Principe" after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The MLSTP/PSD is not a "coalition" like the MDFM and PCD). The party of Prime Minister Maria do Carmo Trovoada Silveira, it holds 24 seats and controls parliament in alliance with the ADI. The MLSTP allegedly gets money from China and Angola. Party President is Poser de Costa, and the Vice President is Dionisio Diaz. It is widely believed an outright MLSTP win would result in Sao Tome shifting diplomatic recognition back to the PRC from Taiwan.

--ADI. Currently with five seats in the National Assembly, the ADI and party President Patrice Trovoada are said to be as flush with campaign funds as the MDFM and MLSTP. Many observers, confident they know sources of funding for the MLSTP or the MDFM, were quick to note that "they had no idea" where ADI was getting money. One MLSTP supporter, when pressed, opined that private Nigerian and American oil executives were the likely culprits. ADI suffered some defections in a power struggle between Trovoada and founding members of the party; many key grass-roots organizers now support the UDD.

--UE-KEDADJI Coalition. Representing four parties (the PPP, CODO, PRD, and UNDP), UE-KEDADJI currently holds three seats and will run with an addition party, the PRS, in the upcoming election. Francisco Silva (PPP) runs the coalition delegation in the Assembly. Other party leaders include Manuel Neves Silva (CODO), Armindo Graca (PRD), Paixao Lima (UNDP), and Hamilton Vaz (PRS). The coalition has limited financial means, but may squeak out a few seats.

--UDD. A new party with some old names, including Party Vice President Gabriel Costa (a former Prime Minister), and current National Assembly Vice President Carlos Neves. Party President Manuel Diego and Costa both complain that they have no funds to run a campaign, but other observers feel the party may gain a few seats behind the political experience of its leaders and help from some skilled campaigners who defected from the ADI.

--Novo Rumo. The "New Path" is led by Joao Gomes, whose populist rhetoric has struck a chord with voters. A long-shot to win more than a few seats, he appears to be one of the more respected politicians in the campaign.

--FDC. The party of ex-"Buffalo" Arlecio Costa. The Buffaloes are apartheid-era South African mercenaries, some of whom were implicated in the 2003 coup attempt. At last count 14 ex-Buffalo live in Sao Tome. FDC is unlikely to win a seat.

--PTS. Party President Anicleto Rolin. Unlikely to win a seat.

--GE. Party President Levy Nazare formed the "Generation of Hope" around technocrats and government officials in their twenties and thirties, who want to end the mismanagement of their parents' generation. Nazare complained that big parties will bury the smaller parties with externally-donated funds, and considered dropping out of the election when government campaign funds were not provided (as occurred in some earlier elections). Nazare does not expect to win much support beyond the urban middle class, but chose to remain in the election to take advantage of broadcast time provided to all parties on state run television and radio to get his message across.

--PSL. Party President Augustino Rita. Unlikely to win a seat.

A seat is cheaper in Caue...if you can get there

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16. (C) All 55 seats in the National Assembly are open. The seats are allocated to six different districts in Sao Tome, and a seventh in Principe Island, although the parties are not obliged to run in each district. Actual residence in a district is not a prerequisite for candidacy, a cause of some friction with voters as most candidates on party lists are middle and upper-class elites from the capital district of Agua Grande. Parties win seats based on getting a percentage in each district, making votes in districts like Caue (642 votes needed for a seat) more valuable than Agua Grande (2464 votes per seat). Parties may form coalitions and add their vote totals together (even after the election) to claim seats. (Comment: Unfortunately for party activists interested in buying votes, roads to Caue are in an exceptionally poor state of repair. End comment.) A total of 79,842 voters are registered in Sao Tome and Principe:

District	Seats	Registered Voters
Agua Grande	13	32,025
Me Zochi	13	20,550
Canta Galo	7	7629
Caue	5	3206
Lemba	6	5780
Lobata	6	7305
Principe	6	3347

Real Money Today For Oil Money Tomorrow

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17. (C) Campaign spending is reportedly lavish, and accusations of vote buying are routine. Many Sao Tomeans perceive the stakes are higher for this election, believing the next Assembly will control Sao Tome as oil revenue begins to arrive in the islands. Expectations of an oil windfall are premature, but politicians are reportedly spending far more than in previous elections regardless. Banker and former Minister of Finance Acacio Bonfim told the Embassy there is an unusually high demand for Dobras (the local currency), and believes that campaign spending and vote buying are the cause. His firm (the Bank of Sao Tome and Principe) has watched politicians empty their local currency accounts in preparation for the election, and he fears the additional spending and supposed influx of hard currencies will temporarily strengthen the Dobra and even create a short term spike in consumer prices.

Dispute highlights Assembly-Presidency Conflict

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18. (C) The National Electoral Commission (CEN) administers the vote and all 232 polling stations, and is at the center of the most recent dispute between the Assembly and the President. President Menezes recently formed an independent audit committee to examine the CEN's data base in a dispute over 9000 "undocumented" voters, a move even neutral

observers condemned as unconstitutional. An MDFM party member said Menezes' intention was good, but the execution, terrible. National Assembly Vice President Carlos Neves attacked Menezes publicly for the move. He told the Embassy that if the CEN granted the committee access it would create chaos, adding that these problems should be addressed by the "right institutions," i.e., the Assembly, and not the President. Neves adds that most of the 9000 undocumented voters were legally registered in 1996, as the law allows two witnesses to stand in for documentation such as a birth certificate. CEN President Jose Carlos Barrios agrees with Neves, saying he will give the President's committee the output from his data base, but not let them anywhere near his computers.

A system that works..sort of

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19. (C) COMMENT: The constant infighting, bickering, and political logjams that mark Sao Tome political institutions obscure the fact (or perhaps prove the point) that Sao Tome is something rare in this part of Africa: a functioning democracy. Despite possible vote buying, voters who go to the polls are free to pick any party on the ballot, a point that even constitutes the campaign strategy for some smaller parties (take their money and vote for us...). The MLSTP and MDFM most likely will split most of the vote, with ADI, UDD, UE-KEDADJI, and perhaps Novo Rumo picking up a few seats.

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Unless a party picks up a majority, an alliance in the Assembly will again be required, and the conflict between the Assembly and the President will continue. If the MLSTP wins, President Menezes may decide not to run for reelection to avoid the frustration of fighting the Assembly for the majority of his second term. Regardless, most observers confidently predict that the ballot on the 26th will be free and fair, and the population will peacefully accept the results on the 27th.

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